



Elie Nadelman

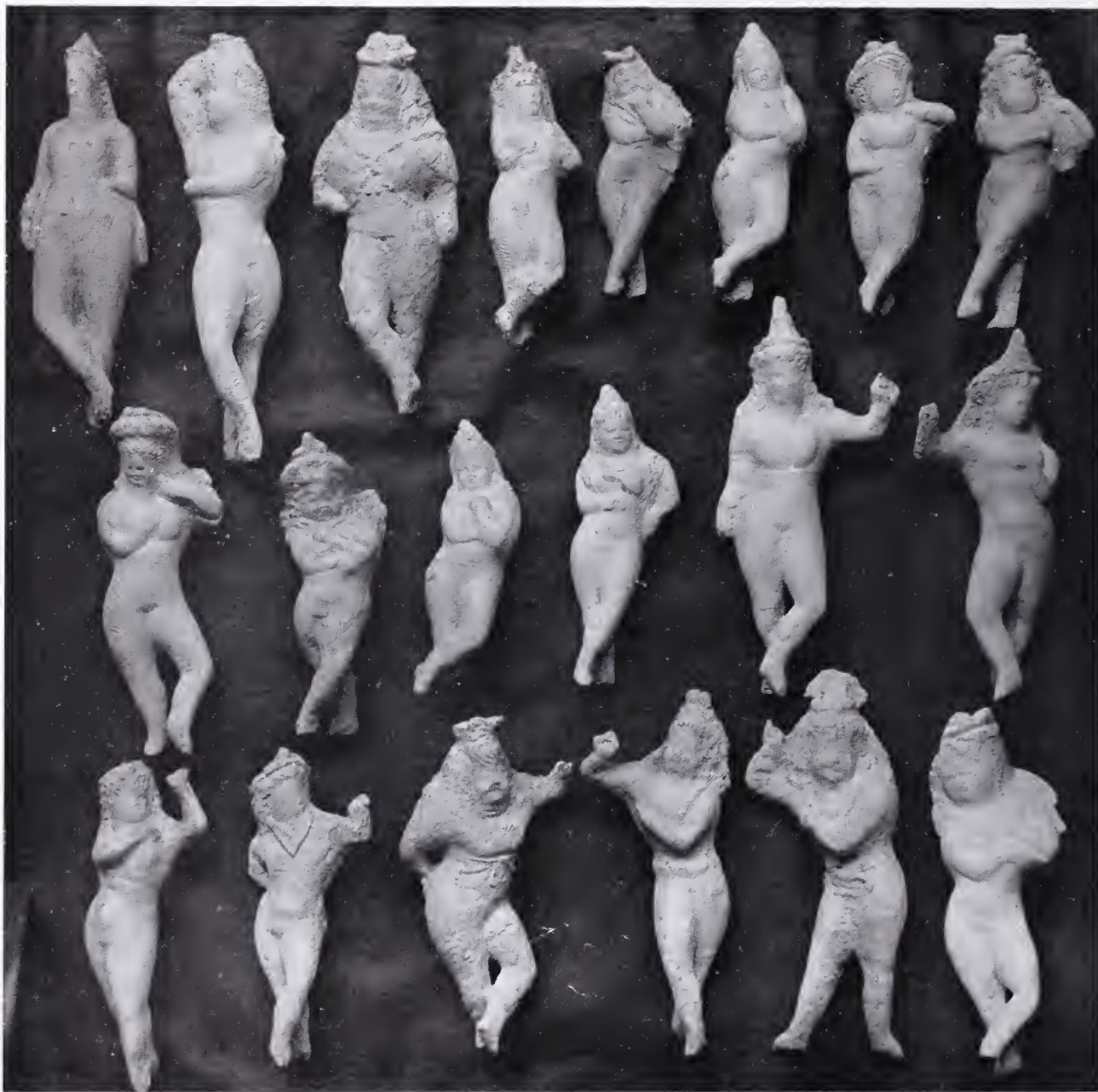
*Sculptor
of the Dance*

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Frontispiece: Plaster figurines: ca. 1942-45

Photo: Ganley

COVERS: Front: Toe Dancer. Bronze: ca. 1917. Back: Plaster figurines with pencil indications of decoration: ca. 1945-46. Photos: Ganley

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Editors

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Elie Nadelman: Sculptor of the Dance

by Lincoln Kirstein

Elie Nadelman's sculpture reveals many dazzling, indeed baffling aspects of his mercurial talent. One of his life-long interests was Theatre, primarily the theatre of gesture—the significant arrested pose, the unique isolated position which is both synthesis of cumulative action and static description of movement. His private proscenium framed music-hall, concert-stage, theatrical and social dancing, and the circus.

Nadelman felt his immediate masters in the depiction of the contemporary scene were Constantin Guys, Gavarni, Daumier and Degas; he also admired Lautree and Seurat, both of them devotees of circus, variety-shows and public balls. Unlike most of these, Nadelman made no portraits of individual dancers; he was less captivated by personality than by a search for epitome.

He devoted himself for twenty years to the capture of an essential silhouette which might represent a human style and an historic epoch, yet, at the same time demonstrate by its classic, residual stance and mass, the lineal descent of the past into our own period. He showed the dance as a description of his time, and as a traditional rite whose ceremonial fulfillment in entrance, performance and recognition of and by an audience comes down to us in an unbroken inheritance from antiquity. The dance for Nadelman was at once a psychological and a theatrical expression, compacted of the impulse to exhibit the performer's body, to please with it, to dare and compete by it,—a demonstration of the human organism in its intense physicality, beautiful and grotesque; silly and splendid; exaggerated and modish.



Surprised Lovers. Pen: ca. 1915

Elie Nadelman was born in Poland in 1882. Educated in Warsaw, he went to Munich in 1902 where he admired the circus, the opera (still in the lively atmosphere of Wagnerian modernism), and the music-halls with their roster of French can-can dancers, Hungarian violinists, Italian jugglers and British magicians. He lived in Paris from 1903 until 1914, when he came to New York. Almost at once, he fell in love with the folk-arts of Pennsylvania German potters and calligraphers, the wood-carvers of Salem and Charleston, and the ubiquitous journeyman limning of eighteenth and nineteenth century America. He was an innovator in this enthusiasm; before he started collecting pottery, painting and carving, few people considered that anything worthy of

this nature had been created in the United States save by the Sioux or the Navajo. The Nadelman Museum of Folk Arts in Riverdale, New York, showed the sources of our handicraft in Europe, leading to prime examples by mastercraftsmen in the United States. When the sculptor and his wife lost their fortune, the collection entered many important public and private collections, where, although dispersed, it may still be seen.

Nadelman found that American vaudeville also contained a rich and active deposit of folk tradition. When he came to America, variety was in its sunset glory, a peak of virtuosity and competition, just before the birth of the talking-film and radio killed it. In his parlor hung a superb set of Venetian



Left: Surprised Lovers. Brush and pen: ca. 1916 Right: Social Dancers. Pen: ca. 1919

Commedia dell'arte characters; he saw in music-hall and burlesque the same incisive statements of telling gesture imbedded in the long history of Western European theatrical improvisation, tricks, gags and routine. He collected theatrical photographs from the seventies through the twenties—from Niblo's Garden and Coster & Bials to the Ziegfeld Follies and National Winter Garden Burlesque.

He saw social-dancing as a behaviouristic portrait of his times, but he was neither merely the sympathetic social historian nor the clever European visitor. He managed, after intense observation, to choose permanent elements in a transient fad like the Tango, and, selecting the most characteristic as well as the most traditional elements in

a season's craze, erect in two small wooden images, the monument of a decade. But his process was rigorously selective; among his sketches are many rejected ideas; a drummer with a battery of traps and cymbals, a wheelchair on the Atlantic City board-walk, a circus-rider on her horse. These notations he never developed because he seems to have felt they were insufficiently compact; their forms comprised too many disjunct elements. He went so far as to make an elaborate Cellist in plaster, complete with his baroque instrument. But it became too complicated, and never reached final form in wood. He could not weld a composition of cello in relation to cellist in that fixed solidity he usually found.

Nadelman's first one-man show was held



Above: Musical Comedy Team. N. Y. ca. 1919

Left: Social Dancers. Pen: ca. 1919

at the Galerie Druet in Paris, April, 1909. It created more interest than any modern sculpture since the Rodin exposition at the Universal Exhibition of 1900. Nadelman here introduced his analytical method applied to form and volume in the human figure which anticipated Cubism, showing himself a master-craftsman, and though still very young, already entirely capable of handling many intractable materials, from stone and tinted bronze to wood and ceramics. His whole early work was like the promulgation of a thesis, a living lecture on the nature of sculpture, demonstrating the use of a personal analytical hand and eye applied to human anatomy. His derivation from classical antiquity was apparent; he was playfully known as "Phidiasohn" or "Praxitilman." He had conceived his method of decomposition and reconstruction of formal elements in seclusion. After his first show, he

emerged more into the world of salons. He talked much with Leo and Gertrude Stein, who were already patrons of Modernism. He read Baudelaire, whose poetry and criticism first defined the cultural climate of the great cities of the West, after the Industrial Revolution; whose attitude contained a philosophy and almost a religion of urban, dandiacal modernity; whose great introduction to Constantin Guys announced the essence of *la vie moderne*, as a style, a *coup de grace* to the academic classicism of Jacques Louis David. Nadelman, instead of feeling himself a contemporary classicist as he was inclined to be judged on the strength of his early marbles, became the sculptor, *par excellence* of contemporary life, innovator and precursor of our own "modern" art. He alone managed the civil dress and habitual gestures of the twentieth century, or at least its early, influential decades, and gave them a uni-

form typicality as definitive as Guardi, Daudier or Seurat gave theirs.

An enormous number of Nadelman's drawings are extant; but before 1914, there are none which show any direct observation of society. The most immediate expression of modernism he had reached was to have certain early bronze and marble neo-Classical heads wear a *cloche* hat, which might have been either Greek, Roman or Parisian. Just before the war broke out, he was in Belgium, vacationing at a sea-side pension in Ostend, where he made a sketch of his landlady surprising a pair of lovers—possibly her own daughter with her young man (p. 132). This sketch, later reworked in many compositions, was the basic idea upon which one whole aspect of his carving was founded. Later, he was to reject the Landlady entirely; the Lovers became Dancers, evolving from waltzers, or a rag-time pair into their perfection of rhythmic elegance in his cherry-wood "Tango" (p. 141).

Guillaume Apollinaire, poet, art-critic and novelist, who had already described Nadelman in 1911 as working "crowned with roses," defined the epoch immediately preceding the first world war, in his *roman à clef*, *La Femme Assise*:

... the year 1914 commenced with mad excitement. As in the days of Gavarni, the period was dominated by the Carnival. Dancing was all the fashion; they danced Everywhere, Everywhere having taken the place of the masked-balls. ... Life seemed to grow light-hearted, and perhaps later, when with the Tango, the Maxixe, the Furlana, the war and its *bombes-funèbres** would be forgotten, one might say of the peaceful portion of the year 1914, as in Gavarni's famous lithograph: 'They will be pardoned much because they danced so much!'

... They lacked a Gavarni in 1914, but dancers, men and women, were not lacking ... for

* A pun on *pompes-funèbres*: funerals. The Maxixe and the Furlana were two less popular competitors of the Tango, which enjoyed a season's popularity in 1913-14.



Sister Act. Pen and pencil: ca. 1919

Sister Act. N. Y., ca. 1919





Male Head. Plaster, with pencil marking:
ca. 1917 (destroyed)



Clowns. N. Y., ca. 1919. Photo: White

the Tango, that marvelous and lascivious dance which seemed born upon a Transatlantic luxury-liner. . . .

Nadelman's double figure was cut finally in red cherry, a grainless wood preferred by Biedermeier craftsmen. He did not show the fashionable Tango as a transformed folk-dance from the pampas, but as a dance of the *bajo*—the lower Port of Buenos Aires—an intense, tightly controlled, almost fatalistic duet. Further, after a series of sketches, alterations, developments, he made it an inscription of ironic elegance canonizing the high society of international capitals, *thé-dansants* at Ritz hotels, a world that dressed to be seen in public ball-rooms, no longer the feudal society of the *faubourgs* and private *hôtels*. The Tango was epidemic; one danced in spite of the threat of war, or on account of it.

Nadelman drew seven sketches of dancers, starting off bravely enough and collapsing at the end of a week; on each sketch he

wrote only the name of its day: *Lundi, Mardi, Mercredi*, ending up with a double exclamation for *Dimanche!!* These thumb-nail drawings build up his notion of the relentless obsession of the fad. Apollinaire asked:

. . . One never dances more than in the time of revolution and war and what peculiar poet has thus invented that entirely prophetic common ground: *to dance* as on the edge of a volcano?*

Nadelman's dancers are also toys, clothes-horses, parodies of fashion-plates, fused into a figure. He found, after much observation and search, a type of head and body, expanded from his drawings in simple profile, entirely personal to him, yet derived from persistent tradition. His Man is a clown, but scarcely comic; rather, he is surprised, impudent, part Pierrot, an intellectual frame

* No poet, but the Comte de Salvandy, speaking at a fête given by the Duc d'Orleans to the King of Naples, 1830.



Above: Pen sketch: ca. 1918

Right: Acrobatic adagio team. Helen Howell and Bert Harger. N. Y., 1918. Photo: White





Social Dance. Pen and brush: ca. 1915



Social Dance. Pen and pencil: ca. 1916

for a fool or a dandy. His Woman is also a doll, a form-fitting fashion model, a Columbine, her bust swelling in a pouter-pigeon's neat strut; her tiny high heels hardly tapping the parquet, a preposterous support for so looming a superstructure.

In the artist's studio, after his death, were found interleaved among actual drawings, many photographs and scraps torn from magazines (*The Police Gazette*, *Vanity Fair*, *Film Fun*, *Variety*, etc.), of vaudeville and musical-comedy teams, clippings of social-dancers from *Town Topics* or the society-columns of the daily press; old tobacco-cards carrying portraits of half-forgotten singers and dancers from Lillian Russell to Eva Tanguay. Nadelman rarely used documents directly. Often, we know he acquired a par-

ticular photograph long after he finished the sculpture to which it would seem to refer; but he saved them, and added to these scraps constantly as a comforting corroboration. He kept to the central line of absolute significance in the gestures. He was always after that formal proportion which could best express his own comment on naive, but consciously contrived extravagance. We do not find, among his scrap-books, pictures of fashionable hostesses of the epoch, *Saloneuses* clothed by Paquin, Callot or Poiret. Rather, he preferred a parody, or inflation of fashion as blown up by artists of the music-halls; a theatricalized civil-dress, which was no longer every-day clothing, however luxurious, but already transformed, for projection from a stage, into a costume. From this costume,



Tango. Pen sketches: ca. 1917



Tango. Left: Plaster model for wood, painted: 1919. Right: Final pencil study: ca. 1918

Nadelman created a uniform in silhouette, a badge for his times. His type of blocked profile and egg-head was taken over and used by many other artists. We find Nadelman-figures in paintings and lithographs of George Bellows, of Guy Pene du Bois, of John Held Jr., of Rockwell Kent (in his early role of Hogarth Jr.), of Erté, the fashion designer and Fish, the caricaturist.

The Tango dancers, Man and Woman, passed through many changes before they found their final position of frontal convergence. We can follow Nadelman's drawings step by step, almost as in the sequence of an animated cartoon (four sketches, p. 139), where first the dancers clasp each other tightly, then divide, rejoin in a stiffer confrontation, almost without physical contact, and finally, in the only pencil drawing of the series (above), dashed off in a few blocked,

comprehensive lines—the partners stand separate yet interlaced, together and apart, a residual and conclusive symbol for all the formal meetings and divisions in the dance.

There are numerous subtle differences between Nadelman's plaster model, above, and the definitive sculpture in wood, opposite. In plaster, the Lady is in complete *décolletage*; the Man has his bow-tie looped in high-relief; he sports a sharply indented white dress waistcoat. In wood, the Lady wears a high-necked gown. White gesso over so great an area of shoulders would have been disturbing in its denial of the texture of the natural surface of the ruddy wood. Likewise, the Man's vest is reduced; his tie is not rendered in bent wire, but lightly indicated in ink-blue paint. Both hair-arrangements are simplified in detail, capped onto the shape of each head; ears are flattened out, and



Tango. Cherry-wood, painted: 1919



Left: Arabesque. Pen: ca. 1917

Below: Mrs. George Leopold, N. Y., ca. 1919. Photo: White



everything small-scaled and delicately particularized in plaster is larger and more monumental in cherry. Swallow-tailed, sheathed in their own sweeping movement, the two dancers converge with a tension which almost anticipates a sharp electrical flash, if and when they should touch. They do not touch; it is the Tango, yet *noli me tangere*; the provocation, the piquancy, the steady flirtation; balance, as on a tight-rope, is maintained at finger-tip length.

The ballet, as such, did not much interest Nadelman, as it had Degas. Nadelman, with Daumier, Lautrec and Seurat, was more attracted by the music-hall, the circus or the social-dance. Although the original Ballet



Pen sketch: ca. 1919

Russe of Serge Diaghilew first played America at the moment when Nadelman was beginning to consider his wooden figures, he was less impressed by the artificial Orientalism so splendidly and freshly framed by Leon Bakst, than with the cruder entertainers of the Irving Place or National Winter Garden burlesque. What appealed to him in Variety was the formal perfection and traditional presentation of each brief routine, the intense personal projection with which individual artists managed to invest a completely unsurprising set of serviceable gestures—the absolute authority of focussing a theatre full of waiting people on the flick of a wrist or the stretch of a toe; the science indeed, of

maintaining attention and crowning it by summoned applause. A dancer is revealed by the rising curtain; the first appearance is framed by the isolated pose of entrance, which is a visual fanfare to the entire routine. A performer, at first immobile, can arrest and stagger an audience in the calculation of a sequence of gestures by which a dance is animated, quitting one established pose for a more fluent and violent set of actions, each of which leads logically to the smash finale. Nadelman's "High Kicker" (p. 145), recalls Seurat's "La Chahut," which he might have seen at least in reproduction, but there were high-kickers also in Egypt; through the Middle Ages, on many cathedral portals, Salome kicked high. Nadelman's witty profile is entirely plastic, although his painted version gains from a judicious play of white gesso wiped off to show the red cherry cheeks beneath (p. 144). From front or back, from every conceivable view, the figure kicks. Each leg seems to have its scissor-shift. The criss-cross and opposition of arms and legs releases the figure into one grand precipitated act. Nadelman observed dancing so closely that while his end results in carved wood seem the essence of clean simplicity, his innumerable sketches of variants are almost like chips from a chisel which slowly released the image in its patient block.

It is a commonplace that Burlesque was vulgar; many artists have shown its cruel, naked, stripped rawness. Nadelman refined all coarseness into a subtle fixity of ostentation. Where Lautrec was savage or Daumier agonized, Nadelman (along with Seurat), while not oblivious to the hoarse laughter of the halls, saw through to the mocked grace inside.

Nadelman collected ship's figure-heads for his museum of folk-art—the hewn images of Negro and Indian, American Eagles and Scottish Chiefs. The large carvings from a single block followed the dominant curva-



High Kicker. Painted plaster model for red cherry-wood (destroyed). Photo: Mattie Edwards Hewitt



Left: Pen sketch: ca. 1917.

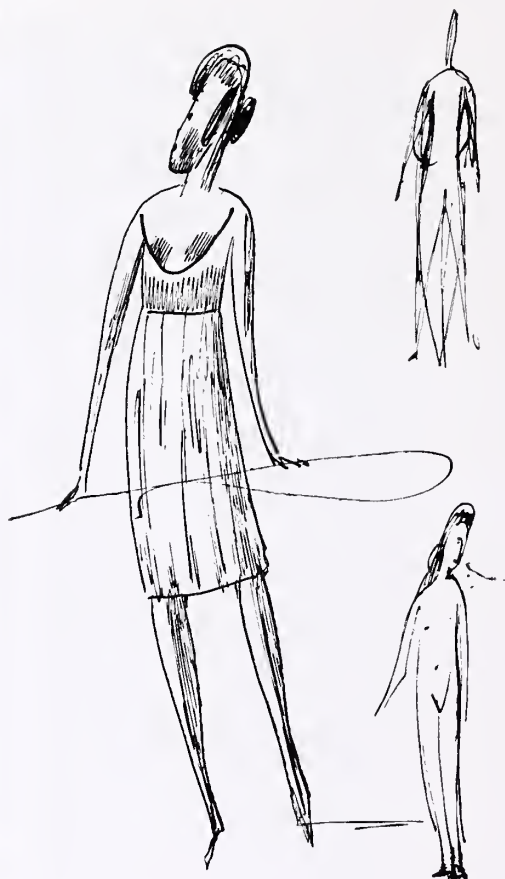


Right: High Kicker. N. Y., ca. 1919. Photo. White

ture and grainage in a tree-trunk. "Columbia," "Hibernia," "Britannia" or the "Lily G. of New Bedford" swelled their breasts to take the split wave along the cleavage of the oak bolt from which they were cut. Similarly, Nadelman would imagine his "Equestrienne" in one single large confining curve, which could be contained within the limits of one of his composite cherry-wood blocks, which he had built up for him out of matched boards, glued securely against warping, since there was no fruit-tree thick enough in its own single trunk. In the plaster model, developed from various drawings (p. 146), he raised her arms, and turned her

whip into a wire hoop, but the result did not satisfy him and this figure was never cut in wood. With the loss of his large studio in 1934, this piece and all the other models for the wood, were destroyed by workmen sent to clear out the building.

Cousin to the "Equestrienne" is the "Concert Singer" (p. 147), in her flattened reverse S-curve, all bust and bustle, as she clasps her hands about to clear the birdy throat before launching into a song of Tosti or Reynaldo Hahn. Although this figure was not cut in wood either, the arrangement of its feet, with their extreme attenuation of needle heel and whittled toe, was the ultimate

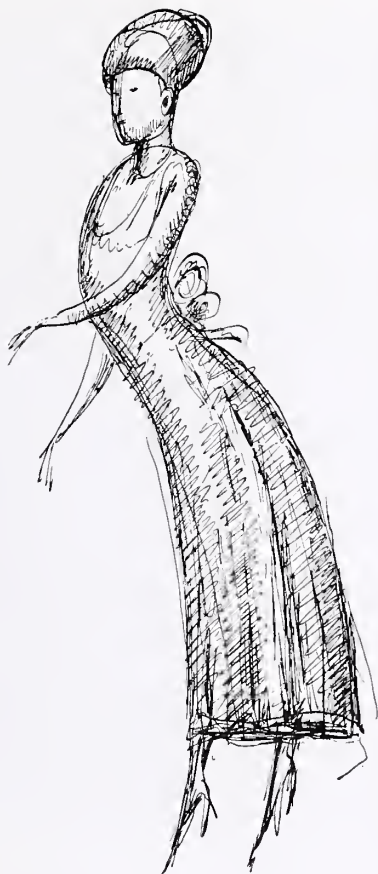


Above: Circus Rider. Pen: ca. 1918

Left: Equestrienne. Painted plaster model (destroyed). Photo: Hewitt

model for several other of Nadelman's best wooden carvings—his Hostess, and the attendant series of women of fashion or the stage. Indeed the Concert Singer, though lost, was not forgotten for fifteen years, when she would be recalled in other variants among his late plaster figurines.

The "Chef d'Orchestre" (p. 148), is at once *premier danseur*, clown, and a virtuoso accompanying the orchestra which he also directs. He is something, too, of a priest who conducts a public ceremony: the rites of our concert-halls. He initiates his congregation into its exposure to music while he con-



Above: Pen sketch: ca. 1917

Right: Concert Singer. Painted plaster model (destroyed). Photo: Hewitt



ducts his band into the exposition of their score. Nadelman's *Orchestral Leader* seems bathed in his own limelight, focussed on a boiled shirt-front, centered in the split arena, pinned between the crowds on stage and in the hall by two thousand pairs of eyes. A bifurcated monolith, his profile as serious

and engraved as a bull-fighter's, the sculptor has found here the precise posture to indicate the entire science and showiness of the bravura conductor from Berlioz to Leonard Bernstein. Its Clown's head is not funny; soberly and impersonally, it is the Dandy. Nadelman does not show us a monster of



Orchestral Leader. Plaster model for wood: ca. 1919 (destroyed). Photo: Hewitt



Chef d'Orchestre. Painted red cherry-wood: 1920
Photo: Ross

vanity, an acrobat of the podium; the figure has a miniature dignity and vast distinction. He is in absolute control—of himself, his orchestra and his audience. Also, it can be read as a symbol of the mind behind performance, the Interpreter of creator—composer or choreographer, whose idea moves through the bodies of others, yet without whom there would be no performance at all. Nadelman understood the Performer, his concentrated yet extroverted exhibit of himself, transfixed in performance, intense, brief, evanescent; when gone, final and lost, yet

leaving behind some essence almost more alive in memory than any other focus of recollection save love itself. All we have left of a memorable evening in the theatre, to help us relive electric moments, are meaningless programs with dead lists of names, a few inadequate and fading photographs, or a phonograph record. Nadelman contrived a synthesis of some of these moments, and left us images as thrilling and as permanent as the performances themselves.

Around 1924, Nadelman began studies for a new set of statues which he was to realize

in Galvano-plastique (p. 150), a modern industrial process, less expensive than bronze, but able to achieve its monumental effect. Plaster is electroplated with a deposit of copper; the skin of metal can be colored or otherwise patined. It has the exact surface of bronze, if not its complete lasting power. It is grosser in grain and scale, but Nadelman, with his instinctive mastery of material, made plaster models entirely suitable to the new medium, indeed enhancing their novel elegance through a supremacy over its coarseness, by a transformation of dead weight into balloon-like, almost elephantine delicacy. Elephants are dainty in their hugeness, and so are Nadelman's Amazons and Acrobats, his Circus-riders and Dancers. He appropriated the shape and proportion of Arena queens, ladies of the Beef Trust, of two-a-day burlesque when it was still circus instead of strip-tease. Those older music-hall artists, whose portraits we still treasure, were massive, solid, muscular; plastically satiated. Female, they are also almost lady-giantesses; not freaks, but definitely of some super-human species, who respire only in the humid atmosphere of tanbark and grease-paint. But, as always, with Nadelman, they are clad in their own replenished dignity, mistresses of mare or python, trapeze or slack-wire—really toe-dancers—their whole awesome bulk supported on the tiniest of spindled attachments, floating or balanced rather than standing in the ring.

Nadelman frequently laid colour on his metal and wooden figures; this colouring was applied, not as ornamental enrichment, but as further explanation of the character of the form itself. The colour was always the simplest, a line bounding the edges of a leotard on a svelte trunk; masses of hair as a Prussian-blue cap, or the loop of a thin ribbon to accent bust, neck or waist, like a beauty-spot. Frequently, the colour indicated in drawings or plaster sketches disappeared almost entirely in his finished work, although



Acrobat. Pen and brush: ca. 1924

Pauline Markham. N. Y., ca. 1875





Painted plaster sketches for galvano-plastique figures: ca. 1924. Photo: Ganley

often one finds some subtle trace of it, a last accent of sober sophistication.

When Nadelman lost his large studio, he made no more big figures. He began, perforce, the investigation of another range of vision, small in size, but almost more monumental in scale than his previous work. For ten years he modelled small bodies in clay, recut them in plaster, marked the plaster with pencil corrections or decorations, intending they should all be cast in terra cotta. His untimely death ended plans for the installation of an electric kiln in the small studio hidden within his Riverdale house. But he knew well the properties of baked clay. Before 1932 he had made several hand-

some series of ceramic ornaments in glazed and unglazed clays. He owned a collection of original Tanagrine fragments as well as a comprehensive library of books about antique fired-earth processes and collections. His late small plaster figures were ceaseless studies in form, surface texture, gesture and proportion. He had always in mind the type of modelling best expressed within the limitations of baked earth. He invented a huge repertory of figures, most of them related directly or indirectly to the dance. For these, his sources were a combination of Tanagra and Alexandrian baroque souvenirs, European and American burlesque or vaudeville, and his own previous researches and



Galvano-plastique figure: 1924-25. Photo:
R. V. Smutny

comments. While they recall the Near East, and the late splendor of Hellenistic extravagance, they are never simple pastiche. He also looked at photographs of the Denishawn Dancers in their approximation of Siamese Court dances; almost any sort of theatrical dancing moved him to model. He was not looking for authentic reproductions of an historic style of movement, but merely for movement authentically plastic, of any type.

Nadelman's late figures are much smaller and hence less immediately arresting in pose or profile than those in metal and wood. But they have their own penetrating character. In every mass or form—the fluency, balance and weight is loaded with a buoyant

yet grandiose meaning. The slouch, drag and disdain of the burlesque-queen is here; her parody of high-world elegance; her devastating impersonation of a more expensive, more snobbish, more exclusive modishness. The cutting, almost surgical comment of burlesque, so marvelously understood as social and emotional climate in E. E. Cummings' fantastic play, "Him," is sometimes pre-supposed by Nadelman. But the sculptor drapes and veils it as a scaled-down, microscopic floor-show. His Girls, too, are fancy Dolls: wide-eyed, bangled with curls, crowned with Tanagra tiaras, baby-faced, petulant as spoiled princesses of a naughty court, yet they are also doped and dreamy; sleep-walkers through the heavy-scented dream of raw footlights and unbelievable make-up.

And yet each little lady has her impending, floating or regal, drawling entrance. *Femmes-bébés*, they are kin to all spectacular courtesans from Messalina to Cleo de Merode. They are flowers from the folk-lore of cities; the vision of theatre, circus, opera, ballet, which boys who live in the provinces, and who have only seen pictures, or posters, know must be the living magic of white nights on the boulevards or on Broadway. They are a child's hope of what the realized promise of the stage must be, the galaxy "over-the-footlights" in its fantastic stellar truth. No exposition of so intellectual and evanescent a subject-matter could succeed save in a miniature art. If one is willing to follow through Alice's deep door, this tiny world comes alive: the dancers dance; the naked bodies are transparently clothed in jeweled spangles, in feathers and womanliness; the curls seem faintly gilded coils and snakes; the tiny rose-bud faces gleam with pouting and provocation, suffused in their tidy, morbid glamor, and despite any definition, they remain mysterious, relics of the practice of glamorous cults in our huge nocturnal towns whose meaning we sense but cannot say.

